

## **Plurality in Medicine: Some Aspects of Scientific Pluralism in the Context of Application**

By: Basel Myhub

In his book *Is Water H<sub>2</sub>O?* Hasok Chang advocates a particular version of scientific pluralism which amounts to be an ideology, that is, a plurality in science should be actively promoted. While plurality might be unproblematic in epistemic research, and hence tolerated, it is rational to expect this to be problematic in the application-oriented fields.

I examine whether the cultivation of plurality in the application-oriented scientific domains leads to the emergence of conflicting accounts among the different theories, and consequently, leads to undermining the role of science in assessing practical issues. This might be a real threat to Chang's science policy. Chang's reply to this objection is that users need to "make their own judgment" and points out that, for instance, people in many Asian countries decide on their own to use traditional or Western medicine.{footnote/Hasok Chang, *Is water H<sub>2</sub>O? Evidence, realism and pluralism* (Springer, 2012), pp. 265-266.} In other words, Chang seems to suggest that the individual person or the policymaker should make his or her decision concerning what system and what advice to take in each particular situation.

In addressing this question, I give a descriptive account of the so-called "medical pluralism" in Western countries. What I mean with medical pluralism is the co-existence of biomedicine and alternative medicine(s) roughly since the late 1960s. While a plurality of medical practices had existed until the mid-19th century, the current pluralism emerged in a context where biomedicine had very solid scientific foundations on the one hand and a strict alliance with the state on the other.

I shall argue that today's medical pluralism in Western countries is a complementary and hierarchical one. Although alternative medicine is introduced and accepted as a medical system, it is restricted to certain areas that biomedicine fails to address adequately, such as with chronic diseases. More importantly, alternative medicine is kept in a subordinated position with respect to biomedicine in many legal ways. The result is a plurality that minimizes conflicting accounts and sets a relation of subordination which determines a priori how to settle any emerging controversy.

The emergence of medical pluralism in Western countries has been shaped by socio-political and economic factors. Alternative medicine has been included despite the perceived lack of scientific evidence in its support. However, this lack of scientific legitimacy of alternative medicine has resulted in a subordination to the more-established biomedicine. Meanwhile, research on alternative medicine's techniques and backgrounds is increasingly carried out worldwide, and one of its announced aims is to guide consumers/patients with regard to the effectiveness of alternative practices/medicines. In other words, the criteria of including and ordering medical systems included, but it was not limited to, epistemic values.

In sum, I shall argue that cultivating plurality in the application-oriented fields can be unproblematic after all. Conflicting accounts might be limited by minimizing areas of intersection among the cultivated systems, and clear preset criteria should guaranty a way of choosing among the different systems in cases of conflict.